

The last word World in change

by the editors

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Since the last issue of JUMP CUT appeared, enormous, unexpected, and even unimaginable changes have rocked the world. The communist governments in most of Eastern Europe have fallen, the iron curtain is down, and the Soviet Union itself in the throes of rapid social and political change. Nelson Mandela has been released by the South African government, which may now negotiate with the African National Congress. The Chinese government brutally put down a huge popular non-violent movement for democracy. And the Sandinista government suffered a stunning election defeat in Nicaragua.

What history will reveal as people work out new social and economic forms, nationally and globally, is what a new form of socialism might look like. We do not imagine that this new socialism will take shape without intense conflict and even bloodshed. In the United States, the changes in the communist world and in Nicaragua have produced a kind of gloating in the press and in the White House; the release of Mandela, a call for the ANC to abandon armed struggle; and the oppression in China, a short-lived and token call for economic sanctions. To listen to this version of historical events, communism is over, marxism is dead, and socialism has been swept into the dustbin of history.

A whole new territory of skilled but cheap labor and eager consumers has opened up. Consumerism seems to sweep the entire world as McDonalds opens in Moscow and businessmen rush to Eastern Europe. Yet the United States does not have the funds to prop up new economies. And the logic of capitalism itself is to produce the conditions for and also to try to thwart the development of socialism.

In the most literal sense, socialism is people's effort to defend themselves and to construct a more just society. It come from the analysis and struggles of all those marginalized and maimed by capitalism's drive for profit — a profit derived from extracting surplus value from workers' labor and from sacking the world's natural resources. Events in Eastern Europe and China have revealed serious problems with socialist and communist institutions and the entrenched bureaucracies running those countries. Yet the downfall or oppressive actions of communist

governments has not changed the basic situation of the victims of capitalism and imperialism. We cannot forget the homeless people and crack addicts in the streets of our cities, the death squads in El Salvador, Guatemala, and the Philippines, the Intifada in Palestine, or the poverty and starvation in Africa. We know that in the United States, racism, sexism, and homophobia remain firmly in place, claiming victims everyday. If inadequate historical models of socialism have fallen, it will be no victory to replace them with capitalism's versions of freedom and democracy — that is, with merely the expansion of consumerism and illusions of free choice.

What we have learned in this century is that the capitalist powers have been able to thwart the full development of socialism. What has ended is the first crude experiment in socialism that began in 1917 with the Russian revolution, the first phase in the struggle between socialism and capitalism. It remains to be seen whether or not the Soviet Union can reform itself and move forward as a socialist country. But we must also remember that from the moment of that first revolution, the United States and other capitalist countries conducted an active and multifaceted counterrevolution against socialism. That counterrevolution supported the White forces in the Russian civil war; it encouraged European fascism in Spain, Italy and Germany in the hope of defeating the Soviet Union; it fueled the Cold War and the arms race after World War II. It has opposed by force of arms trade union organizing in capitalist countries and every effort at social reform in "underdeveloped" areas of the world. Our government has directly or indirectly waged nearly constant warfare since 1945 — in Greece, China, Korea, Guatemala, Vietnam, Cuba, the Congo, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Angola, Lebanon, Grenada, and Panama.

Even though capitalism has been able to prevent the full development of socialism in every country that started down that path since 1917, the need for socialism and its ideals live on. We have learned many things from this experiment. These lessons have become part of our collective memory. Socialist revolutions have released enormous energies in all areas of human activity. The Soviet 1920s, the Cuban 1960s, and the Nicaraguan 1980s are three of the most creative moments in history since World War I. Socialist revolution empowers many strata of people whose abilities capitalism overlooks and wastes. The Russian revolution demonstrated that socialism could transform a backward, feudal, agricultural country into a world industrial country without producing the poverty and the gross economic inequalities found in capitalism. The cost was very high but no higher than in western capitalist countries built on wars, slave trade, and subjugation and annihilation of many million indigenous peoples. Revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua have demonstrated that poor countries, without first becoming industrially developed and with little outside help, can drastically improve people's healthcare, nutrition, and education, especially by organizing at the base. If left alone and not fraught by constant efforts to overthrow it, socialism may well be capable of bringing about the changes that we claim it can.

For many of us who have worked for progressive causes in the United States, change seems slow in coming and regressive forces sometimes appear overwhelmingly strong. Yet recent history has show that massive social and

political changes can happen rapidly. It is exciting to think that the United States might change as fast as Eastern Europe recently has, yet it is hard for us to imagine that as a likelihood or even a realistic fantasy. Progressive change has always happened very slowly and painfully here. We live in a profoundly conservative society. If we look at the long development of the U.S. labor movement, the women's movements — first and second waves, and at the struggles of African Americans first to throw off the bonds of slavery and now to struggle for the most basic human rights, we can get an idea of the slow pace and very high cost of the most basic social advances here.

But recent events in Eastern Europe should raise our spirits about the possibilities for change and teach us some basic lessons, too. Expectations for peace and disarmament are running high. People all over the world are willing to organize to guarantee that the environment is cleaned up and protected. Western European countries are moving rapidly toward some sort of European union with many strong social democratic and welfare aspects; most likely much of Eastern Europe will become integrated into that union. At the same time, our government has become increasingly more corrupt. In the United States, the gap widens between what the government does and represents and its citizens' needs and desires. Most visibly, the Iran-Contraagate, savings and loans, and HUD scandals reveal the government's secret actions that most citizens do not support.

For progressives in the United States, coalition politics may be the best way to work for change in the near future. We can draw a lesson again from Eastern Europe. Communists and non-communists alike have joined together to end bureaucratic structures out of touch with people's needs. In the United States, activists must also learn new ways to come together and join forces. For example, in many communities, coalitions of labor, church, and grassroots community groups are learning how to work together.

When joining together in such coalitions, it is crucial not to formulate and apply "least common denominator" politics, but actively to take up the needs and demands of the coalition's various sectors and especially to deal with issues of racism, class bias, sexism, and homophobia. For example, we know there are enormous differences in working styles and language among different members of a coalition, and such differences are often tied economic disparities (e.g., community groups may not have much money as labor unions do for organizing projects). Women, gays, blacks and latinos must be able to enter coalitions and not have to educate the others constantly about sexism and racism; the struggle against racism and sexism must be part of the theory and the organizing structure of a coalition as a whole, from the start of its organizing project.

If we want change, we have no choice but to come together and learn about each other's backgrounds and needs as we work together for a common goal. That may be difficult for many intellectuals and artists who cling to an ethic of individualism and who have bourgeois class status if not a high income. We value our individuality and like to keep a certain distance from committing ourselves to work with a large group for the sake of social action. And we may not like either the

philosophy or style of larger organizations that may play a key role in such coalitions — often labor unions or church groups. Yet intellectuals and artists have crucial skills to contribute to organizing efforts. We know how to gather and summarize information, to write and analyze, and to make media and art that can move people's hearts and minds.

The lesson to be learned from the changes in Eastern Europe is that any leadership, no matter how progressive its goals, must constantly listen to its base and draw its strength from that base. It's a lesson that Mao Tse-Tung constantly reminded us of. All progressive social policy and institutions that purport to serve the people must constantly return to ordinary people to ask about, listen to, and act upon people's needs. If this sounds idealistic, we have recent history to teach us how rapidly stagnant governments and institutions can fall. Those of us who can see and feel repelled by the abuses of our own government and other social and economic institutions here should take heart and have confidence in our ability to use our intellectual and artistic skills to work with others for the sake of large-scale social change.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)